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Mass media taken to task for 'refusing to take sides'

By Glenn Garvin
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"This morning we have heard the press accused of being biased, conspiratorial, lazy and apathetic," former British Foreign Affairs Minister Alan Chalfont said yesterday, gazing straight across the table at eight prominent journalists. "I'm going to be a bit more critical."

That more or less captured the spirit at the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington yesterday as the Jonathan Institute's international conference on terrorism moved into its third day with a panel discussion on terrorism and the media.

For an hour and a half, the eight panel members — including Ted Koppel of ABC News, Bob Woodward of The Washington Post, Daniel Schorr of Cable News Network and syndicated columnist George Will — fielded questions from an audience that seemed to regard them only slightly more highly than the terrorists themselves.

Even Mr. Chalfont, who as the host and moderator of the conference is theoretically neutral, turned on the panelists unexpectedly and savaged them for what he witheringly referred to as their "position of magisterial objectivity between our society and those who are attacking it."

"Can we not accept the simple principle that we are at war with international terrorism?" he asked. "There are two sides, theirs and ours. If their side wins, we'll lose our freedoms. The first freedom to go will be that of freedom of the press...."

"Is it too much to ask that the press be on our side?"

Mr. Chalfont later apologized to the audience for joining the fray, but quoted Winston Churchill by way of justification: "Between the fire and the fireman, I cannot adopt a neutral stance."

The audience seemed to agree with him, asking several questions about why journalists won't forthrightly side with the authorities against terrorism.

One woman asked Mr. Woodward whether, if an international agency was set up to combat terrorism, the news media would cooperate with it by sharing information.

"It's not our job," Mr. Woodward said, shaking his head. "Our job, simply and happily, is to find out what's going on and publish it." The audience rumbled ominously, and even some of the other panel members drew back.

London Daily Telegraph correspondent John O'Sullivan said he agreed that Mr. Woodward ought to publish, say, news of an impending terrorist attack learned from a confidential source.

"But does he feel it's his duty to inform the police about the identity of this person who obviously knows the secrets of terrorism?" Mr. O'Sullivan continued. "...There ought to be guidelines in the journalism profession to prevent this sort of thing... The public's right not to be murdered takes precedence over its right to know."

"As a journalist, you are unlikely to have credible terrorist sources that will tell you when they are going to do something," Mr. Wood-

ward replied, adding that in any event, he would never promise confidentiality to someone who was planning a murder.

Mr. Woodward had a particularly rough time with the audience. Several members angrily demanded to know why Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yassir Arafat isn't routinely identified as a terrorist in Post stories.

One questioner said PLO members are usually called "guerrillas, or forces — military or paramilitary forces. The only term I haven't seen used in reference to the PLO yet, and I'm waiting for it, is 'partisans.'"

Added another: "If Mr. Woodward does not know who the Post is sleeping with, he has not been reading his own paper very carefully."

"My job is to get information and publish it," said Mr. Woodward, "not to worry about who we're going to call a terrorist and who we're not going to call a terrorist."

The panel members themselves were by no means uncritical of the job journalists do in covering terrorism. Mr. O'Sullivan agreed that reporters use loaded language in writing about the subject.

"'IRA chief of staff,' for some chap who has five or six hired killers," he exclaimed. "It's absolutely astounding."

Charles Krauthammer of The New Republic argued that "the media have to change their rules in dealing with terrorists... exercise self-control and self-restraint. Call it self-censorship if you want...."

"In covering terrorist events, the media ought to concentrate on who, where, what and when. They ought

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